

Statement of Congressman Ron Kind

H.Res. 402

Expressing the sense of the House of Representatives regarding the urgent need for freedom, democratic reform, and international monitoring of elections, human rights, and religious liberty in the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

May 4, 2004

Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my colleague from Indiana, Congressman Burton, for introducing this important legislation and helping bring attention to the situation in Laos. As a representative of a large Lao-Hmong community in western Wisconsin, I rise today as a proud cosponsor of H.Res. 402, a resolution expressing the sense of the House of Representatives regarding the urgent need for freedom, democratic reform, and international monitoring of elections, human rights, and religious liberty in the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

The United States owes a debt of gratitude to the Hmong veterans, and their families, who served as loyal and dedicated allies during the "Secret War" in Southeast Asia and the Vietnam conflict. Between 20,000 to 30,000 Hmong lost their lives during this time and more than 100,000 Hmong were forced to either flee or live in refugee camps. Through their sacrifices, many American lives were saved in Southeast Asia, and our nation must remain committed to recognizing their service.

Today, approximately 170,000 Hmong currently reside in the United States, including 35,000 in my home state of Wisconsin. Many of these Hmong-Americans have family members still in Laos. Constant allegations of harassment, imprisonment, and even the kidnapping and killing of ethnic Hmong by Lao authorities have been raised by many concerned groups. These reports need to be addressed by Congress and the international community.

The Lao government has one of the most egregious human rights records in the world. The State Department's *Country Report on Human Rights Practices* in Laos makes clear the lack of respect for human rights demonstrated by the Lao government. The report states that:

"The Government's human rights record remained poor, and it continued to commit serious abuses. Citizens do not have the right to change their government. Members of the security forces abused detainees, especially those suspected of insurgent or antigovernment activity. Prisoners were abused and tortured, and prison conditions generally are extremely harsh and life threatening. Police used arbitrary arrest, detention, and surveillance.

“The [LPDR] armed forces are responsible for external security but also have some domestic security responsibilities that include counterterrorism and counterinsurgency activities and control of an extensive system of village militias.... Some members of the security forces committed serious human rights abuses.

“The [Lao] Government continued to restrict freedom of religion...

“The [Lao] Government severely restricted political speech and writing in practice. The Government also prohibited most criticism that it deems harmful to its reputation.

In addition, the *Report on Laos* issued by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom in February 2003 outlines severe violations of religious freedom engaged in by the Lao government. For the third year in a row, the seriousness of these conditions in Laos led the Commission to recommend that Laos be designated as a "country of particular concern."

Congress needs to demonstrate that the United States seeks democratic reforms in Laos. In the 107th Congress, I, along with other members of Congress, introduced H. Con. Res. 318, calling attention to the repressive Lao political environment and urging election and human rights reforms in Laos. Today, we consider similar legislation that calls on the international community to push the Lao government for openness and cooperation.

I remain hopeful that through continued vigilance on this issue, the Lao government will accept democratic reform, stop human rights abuses against the Hmong and other ethnic minorities, and work with, not against, the international community. I urge my colleagues to support this important resolution.